

Earth-Friendly Gardening & Landscaping



Moon Gardens for Luminous Landscapes

For some people, gardening is a diurnal affair: watch them as they toil, sweat, plan, and plant with peppy bright colors resplendent in the sun. Yet for romantic souls, twilight stirs enchantment and a pure quiet beauty which only awakens with the fall of night. For the nocturnal gardener, a moon garden is a phosphorescent paradise, filled with shimmering silver foliage, the subtle glow of white blossoms, and the sultry, intoxicating fragrance of night-blooming jasmines, stocks, and fantastic twining moonflowers.

Before the celestial magic begins, however, there are some earth-bound considerations. For starters, you probably don't want to transform your entire landscape into a moon garden, although there are noteworthy precedents, such as Vita Sackville-West's famous white gardens at Sissinghurst Castle in Britain. Chances are you'll prefer something smaller — perhaps just a border (or planter box!) beneath an open window. Many of the finest moon garden plants are both night-blooming and fragrant, so you'll want to keep both plants and aroma near at hand, where you can easily observe them opening. Why not even design your

garden as an accompaniment to a patio or outdoor seating area?

With smaller specialty gardens, it often helps to create a single focal point. Consider using an old-fashioned gazing ball to reflect both the moonlight and moonlit blossoms. There are also newfangled solar-powered gazing balls, walkway luminaries, and hose guides, among other accessories, which can add a soft glow to your garden.

How about a lunar pool? Your centerpiece could be a small pond bor-

dered with wooly thyme, lamb's ears, aromatic santolina, and the fragrant creamy white flowers of petunias, along with white impatiens and vinca, and pure white salvia. The water itself, mirroring the night sky, might also host a fragrant, night-blooming water lily, such as *Nymphaea 'Trudy Slocum.'* And as sound becomes more audible in the relative quiet of night, you might enhance your sensory experience by adding a Japanese water flute or some similar dripping, bubbling, or gurgling feature.



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Theme Gardens author Barbara Damrosch suggests using a lamppost as her focal point, with the added benefit of providing illumination on moonless nights. The post itself can become the support for any number of night-blooming vines. Or you might erect an arbor or trellis: the perfect home for our native virgin's bower (*Clematis virginiana*), complete with clouds of white blossoms, feathery seeds, and a warm scent throughout the fall.

As for the plants: while the list is long for plants with silver-grey foliage or white flowers, your theme garden should concentrate on several key species — beginning with moonflowers. How could you have a moon garden without it? Giant moonflower (*Ipomea alba*) is a fast-growing relative of morning glories, reaching up to 20 feet with sweetly fragrant six-inch trumpet-like blooms which unfurl at dusk — or on cloudy days. Grown as annuals in our area, they can be started from seed or purchased in small pots at garden centers for a dollar or two.

Angel's Trumpet (*Datura spp.*), also called moonflower, is a focal point all by itself, with large, deep-fluted flowers opening up to eight inches long at twilight, and especially fragrant on warm-to-hot summer nights. The plant can reach three-to-four feet in height, with flowers projecting upward and outward. Often pure white, you might also look for pink, purple, and

lavender varieties. From the night-shade family, the plant is extremely poisonous and should be avoided in gardens visited by children. Often grown as an annual, Patricia Manke at Behnke's in Potomac notes that the plant can be dug up in late fall, allowing it to remain dormant in a garage or cool dark location, like caladiums or cannas, and replanted in spring.

Perhaps the most beloved evening aroma belongs to the rich and spicy, white-flowered and radiant members of the jasmine family, and sometimes to plants which only mimic the scent, such as night-flowering nicotiana, also called jasmine tobacco. Another imposter, night jasmine (*Cestrum nocturnum*) is not a jasmine at all! Rather, it's a tropical shrub richly festooned with countless greenish-white blossoms coaxed open only at night. My smallish, pot-bound specimen easily broadcasts its unforgettable fragrance hundreds of yards through the night.

Other night-bloomers include the subtle sweetness of evening primrose (*Oenothera speciosa*), and night-scented stock (*Matthiola bicornis*), whose fragrance is strongly suggestive of nutmeg and vanilla. Four o'clocks (*Mirabilis jalapa*) bloom true to their name, and offer an interesting palette of colors ranging from dark purple and red to pink and yellow — all equally appealing to human noses and noshing by hummingbirds.

For 24-hour fragrance, you might include shrubs such as our native sweet pepperbush (*Clethra alnifolia*) and Virginia sweetspire (*Itea virginica*). Shrubs will also provide elements of structure to your garden, along with green leaves for a backdrop. Fothergilla is native to the southeast United States, and well-worth selecting for its honey-scented flower clusters reminiscent of soft, creamy bottlebrushes.

Finally, any garden with a moon-theme ought to at least acknowledge the moon goddess Artemis (Diana to the Romans), if only by selecting some namesake plants from the genus *Artemesia*. Options include the very popular *Artemesia 'Silver Mound'* with feathery foliage, the almost too-common dusty miller, fern-like Roman wormwood (*A. pontica*) or true wormwood (*A. absynthium*). For a royal touch, there are several taller white mugworts (*A. ludoviciana*) named 'Silver King' and 'Silver Queen.'

When your gardening adventures turn to moonlight and romance, you'll find that you have opened a door on an exciting new world of planting options. You'll also be opening a magical door into a soft-lit world of new sensory experiences and delights: from heady aromas and the gentle trickle of a water feature, to fluttering moths pollinating your night-blooming bouquets. Get your iPod ready: this would be an excellent time to cue up Debussy's haunting "Clair de Lune."



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